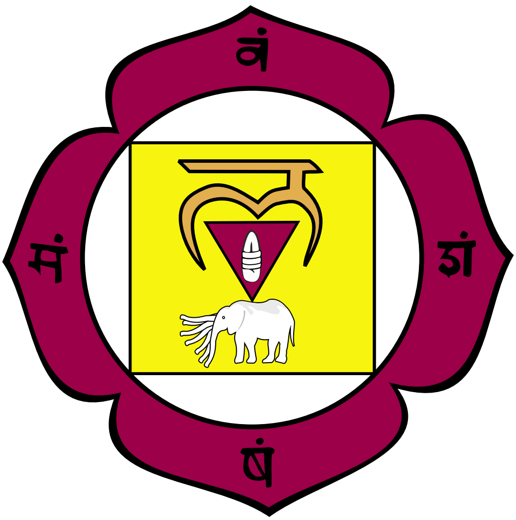
Aspects of Tantra

Five essays exploring modern Tantra



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for Vishvanath

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One: Setting the scene

Mention Tantra to most people, and they will invariably think of sex-magic. Only the other day I was chatting over the phone to a friend in America, and happened to mention that I was currently involved with a Tantric magic study group. My friend became very animated, and in tones of some envy said that he'd always wanted to find a group where people were willing to do Tantric magic with each other. It was at this point that an alarm bell began to ring in my head. "Look," I said, "I mean Tantric magic, not group sex." "Oh," my friend replied, "I wasn't aware that there was anything more to Tantra than group sex." Now this kind of reaction isn't untypical, even among otherwise experienced occultists. Over the last few years, whenever I've mentioned my interest in Tantra, I've often watched people's mental gears grinding away as they visualise contorted sexual postures and perhaps, unusual combinations. To think of Tantra only in terms of sexual rites is a gross oversimplification. In fact, Tantrism is a complete magical system in itself, incorporating a wide variety of magical methods and metaphysics.

Many elements of Tantric magic have become absorbed into the general magical lore of the West. Such elements include concepts such as Kundalini, the Chakras, Karma, Yoga, etc. Concepts such as the Chakras have been widely taken up by new agers and spiritualists, many of whom would be horrified if told of the roots of these concepts in tantrism.

So why does Tantra have such a 'dodgy' reputation? In part, this is due to the efforts of the European chroniclers of Indian religious life. The Abbé Dubois for example, author of the seminal work on Hindu life, "Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies" (1807), wrote in much detail of the "abominable debaucheries" of 'sakti worship'. The Abbé's work contained the first detailed account of the orgiastic ritual that came to be known as 'cakrapuja' (circle-worship), and his book did much to fix the European notion that Hindus were depraved. The Abbé's descriptions of sakti worship was passed down from author to author, and still colours some modern notions of Tantra. Similarly, the Rev. William Ward, writing of famous tantric texts such as the Yoni Tantra, reverted to asterisks occasionally whilst describing *"...things too abominable to enter the ears of man, and impossible to be revealed to a Christian public..."* By the mid-Nineteenth Century, Tantra has acquired the glamour which surrounds it even today - of 'forbidden rites', 'orgiastic ceremonies', 'ritual murder' and 'oriental mysteries'.

Of particular relevance to occultists is the influence of organisations such as the Theosophical Society and the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. The former, in particular, were instrumental in importing many Indian esoteric concepts into Western occultism, although these concepts were invariably mutilated in the process. A good example of this 'twisting' of ideas, (which began with the Theosophists and

continues even now) is that of the Chakras. Now most people who have done some reading of magical texts will have come across the Chakras, as they have become a fairly basic element of what is known as the Western Esoteric Tradition. So much so in fact, that it is more or less taken for granted that the Chakras have some factual basis for existence. The original tantric texts which describe the varying systems of Chakras (some describe six, others, seven, nine, or even eleven) use a great deal of symbolic language and metaphor, much of which western authors have mistakenly taken literally. Sir John Woodroffe, in his book The Serpent Power, gives an example of this when he presents a critique of C.W Leadbeater's book The Inner Life. Leadbeater claims to have counted the number of petals of the Sahasrara Chakra and says that the number is not 1,000, as is often given in tantric texts, but exactly 960. Woodroffe points out that the Indian use of "thousand" is a metaphor for a great magnitude, and not a literal count. Leadbeater has mistaken a metaphorical statement for a literal one, which makes nonsense of his assertion. Unfortunately, many Theosophical notions such as this are passed from book to book, without, as Pete Carroll once quipped "any intervening thought."

It was largely the Theosophical Society who spread the notion that the so-called

'Left-Hand Path' of Tantrism was tantamount to 'Black Magic', due to the prevalence of sexual gnosis. For Theosophists, as much as their Christian brethren, there was no way that sensual enjoyment could be seen as 'spiritual' in any sense.

A third source of obsfucation has been the somewhat biased work of scholars, both European and Indian. According to some scholars, particularly those influenced by orthodox Hindu or Western ideas, Tantra was a degeneration from the rarefied atmosphere of Yoga, into witchcraft, alchemy, and astrology. This is erroneous. There is an increasing body of evidence pointing to the emergence of Tantra from the rituals and concerns of the tribal peoples. A very early Tantric manuscript, the Kubjika Tantra, written in the sixth century, is concerned with the rituals of potters. From the prehistoric period, the pot has been the symbol of the Great Mother goddess. Some scholars believe that Tantra emerged from the blending of alchemy and agricultural magic.

Finally, the image of Tantrism has been coloured by the antagonism of modern India. Indian attitudes towards the sensual have shifted considerably, due to the influence of first Islamic, then Anglo-Saxon prejudice. Professor Bharati, in his classic work The Tantric Tradition, remarks that 'official Indian culture', as formulated by Vivekananda, Gandhi and Radakrishnan, very much considered Tantrism to be very much beyond the pale. Alain Daniélou, in the introduction to his translation of the Kama Sutra, notes that:

> *"Mahatma Gandhi, educated in England, sent squads of his disciples to smash the erotic representations on the temples. ...Pandit Nehru was irritated by my having photographed and published the photographs of sculptures showing homosexual relations, dating from the eleventh century, when he claimed that such vices in India were due to Western influence."*

The Complete Kama Sutra, p10

Whilst researching for this article, I was lent a book called "Kali's Child", by Jeffrey J. Kripal - a biography of Ramakrishna, the 19th century mystic who was a major influence in the reformulation of 'modern Hinduism'. Vivekananda, his most famous pupil was decidedly anti-tantric, describing it as the "filthy vamachara that is

destroying this country". Kripal reveals however, that Ramakrishna himself went through a period of tantric training, which his followers chose to ignore. Moreover, according to this author, Ramakrishna's ecstatic visions and teachings sprung from an erotic source, which has also been conveniently glossed over:

> *"Sakti - in her image, gender, music and scriptures - has been made submissive and obedient. Bengalis are encouraged to be ashamed of her and her Tantras. Sakti is no longer on top of Siva."*
>
> Kali's Child, p27

To understand the beginnings of Tantra, it is necessary to understand something of Indian history. Orthodox Hinduism, the so-called Great or Brahmanic Tradition, has its roots in the Vedas, which encapsulate the religious ideas of the Aryans, who invaded India around 1200 BC, subduing the indigenous peoples (the Dravidians) with their Iron weapons. In the following centuries of pressure, much of that indigenous culture retreated - there was a retreat away from the cities and migration routes into the forests, mountains and villages. The vast hinterlands of India allowed the survival of isolated centres of cultural life which retained elements of great antiquity. Gradually, a landscape emerged along the northern river valleys of cities, supported by a vast countryside divided into isolated village societies. Whilst the orthodox culture was dominated by the Vedic rituals of the Brahmins, there also existed a parallel vision, the Vrata tradition, operating through song, dance, art and magical incantations - a storehouse of both archaic wisdom and contemporary patterns. Similar migrations occurred in the ninth & tenth centuries, when entire Buddhist communities took refuge from persecution in the remote countryside, and in the eleventh to thirteenth centuries, when pressure from the Muslim Invasions forced vast numbers of scholars into southern India. It is in southern India that surviving Dravidian languages can be found.

It is widely believed that, although Tantra as we know it is largely a medieval phenomena, that this 'revival' is a direct descendent of Palaeolithic Goddess worship, and that its magical and psycho-sexual practices evolved from a wide variety of cults and mystery schools. Dr. John Mumford, in "Ecstasy Through Tantra" (1988) goes so far as to assert that Tantrism was the "religion" of the Dravidians and, whilst this may be overstating the case somewhat, there are many scholars who look for the roots of Tantrism within the mists of Dravidian civilisation; it has been estimated that the cities of Harrapa and Mohenjo-Daro (these are modern names) had existed for at least a 1000 years before the arrival of the Aryan invaders, and that the aboriginal Indus Valley civilisation dates back as far as 2500 BC

One of the main problems I feel, that modern Europeans face when encountering Tantra is our own predisposition for expecting things to be clear-cut and easily broken down into bite-size pieces. For example, I have recently been doing some magical work with Siva, and during this, became interested in Siva's primordial form Rudra (Howler). I struggled for a while to find a point where Rudra became Siva, but it's almost impossible to draw such a clear distinction between the two. Fortunately, (at least to my mind), Tantra resists this 'diluting' process due to it's very nature. Being used to (and often, greatly attracted by) a multiplicity of 'traditions' all jostling for attention, occultists all too often make the mistake of seeing Tantra as a coherent tradition. It isn't. What is generally regarded as Tantra is an intricate interweaving of philosophy, magic, yoga's, astrology, alchemy, medicine, folklore, etc. Tantric

elements have freely mingled with the more orthodox Hinduism and Buddhism and some very exotic Tantric Sects have flourished at one time or another, some of which I'll be looking into later in this series. Tantric elements have also been absorbed into more orthodox Hindu belief. The somewhat amorphous nature of Tantra is neatly summed up by Sri Mahendranath Dadaji, former adiguru of the Natha Sampradaya, when he wrote: "a sannyasin has no rules to keep, only a way of life to live." Of course, this is only *his* opinion on the matter. George Weston Briggs, in his book *Goraknath & the Khanphata Yogis*, lists the many rules and regulations of behaviour which were said to constrain this particular sect of tantrics. He then goes on to relate the wide variation in degrees of adherence to same rules. Again, there is a wide variation in how individuals perform their practices, even within a particular sect or sub-sect. Enjoyment of the sensual pleasures of the world is a strong theme in some Tantras, yet the development of magical abilities through the practice of austerities remains a firm foundation of Indian esotericism. Westerners tend to associate Indian spiritual practices with the wandering yogis or itinerant sadhus, but the so-called path of the householder - of the individual who seeks spiritual development whilst holding down a job or keeping a family is widely acknowledged as the most difficult path to tread. Some tantrics were scholars, establishing monastic retreats which became storehouses of learning, whilst others were wandering bards or peasants.

When we attempt to focus on Tantra, it's rather like trying to condense the vastness of history onto a few sheets of paper. Alain Daniélou has made a strong case for the relationship between the mysteries of Shiva and Dionysus. Many modern scholars of Tantrism now think of it as a medieval revival of Palaeolithic fertility worship, the survival of the beliefs & practices of the Indus Valley civilisations, together with the influence of the village and tribal cultures which were excluded (by birth and caste) from Vedic worship. A strong theme in Tantrism is a rejection of the caste system, and the principle of *Svecchacharya* - a Sanskrit term which means to act according to one's own will (i.e. independently). According to Tantric Scholar Mike Magee, the Natha cult were responsible for fomenting the Indian Mutiny, which implies quite a different facet of tantrics than the unworldly, ascetic image which is common in the West. Although debate was a common means for different sects to oppose each other's views, it was not unknown for some sects to resort to more warlike means to settle philosophical differences.

In closing for now, then, Tantra is a huge field for investigation where it's all too easy to make quick judgements based on only a surface appreciation of it's complexities. In the next instalment of this series I will look at some definitions of what tantric magical practice actually consists of and outline some of the key features.

Two: Devotions & demonesses

For this issue, I did originally intend to look at some of what I considered the key charactistics of Tantric practice, and then to go on to discuss some of the magical practices in Tantrism. However, I've decided to, for the moment, concentrate on discussing the magical work, and will return to the key characteristics in part three.

The difficulties of approaching Tantric practice have been compounded by what might be termed the pseudo-imperialistic attitude to non-Western magical systems. Francis King's *Tantra for Westerners* is a case in point. King asserts that there are (at least on the surface) many similarities between Tantric concepts and Western Qabalah. Hence his book presents a 'qabbalized' perspective on Tantra. Fitting the unfamiliar into familiar models may well be useful up to a point, but it becomes a limiting exercise. An analogous situation would be the efforts of early anthropologists to characterize shamanic behaviour as 'epileptic'. It might well fit the theory, but it doesn't tell the whole story. I feel that, to approach Tantra, it is necessary to, at some point, examine orthodox Hindu culture, in terms of history, religion, and psychology - in order to get a grip on the context from which Tantrism springs. There is a tendency for Westerners to treat Tantrism as an 'added flavour' to spice up familiar magical practices, or for that matter, one's bedroom antics (which is the concern of many populist books on the subject).

Devotion and Magic

The generic term for ritual in India is Puja, can be translated as 'worship' or 'magic'. According to Tantric doctrine, the purpose of ritual is to use special techniques in order to make contact with the higher states of being which we call gods and other supernatural beings who can guide and assist us in our efforts to progress. The different worlds are in harmonic relation to each other; and through ritual action, they can be made to respond, just as a stringed instrument will respond when one of its harmonics resounds. Ritual, combined of sound, forms, rhythms, gestures, flowers, lights, incense and offerings carries the operator toward the world of the divine, whilst the deity, also enchanted, is brought nearer. Ritual is thus a bridge to establish and maintain this contact.

It is further held that, since the subtle worlds are many, the effects of ritual may not always be apprehended, and that results quite contrary to the intent may result. Ritual is therefore a potentially dangerous instrument and, whether internal (mental) or external (puja), should follow a systematic ordinance. All elements of puja are based on correspondences and subtle levels of relation.

In Indic magical psychology, man becomes what he worships, and his desire (kama) shapes the form of his becoming.

> *Those who worship the gods become gods; those who worship Ancestors become Ancestors. those who worship the elements master the elements, and those who worship me gain me.*
>
> Krishna, The Bhagavadgita

When considering Puja, we must bear in mind that in Tantric Magical Psychology, all deities are manifestations of self. This is not to say, however, that we should regard deities in the sense of mere aspects of our psyche in the sense that Jungian psychologists or New Agers might.

Thus, by performing Puja, we:

(a) receive the blessing of the deity

(b) develop awareness of our own inner divinity.

Another point that should be borne in mind is that Indic magic is heavily based on the interplay of levels of correspondences, in very much a similar way to how modern qabbalah has developed. Careful study and personal research with these correspondences and concepts will enhance the experience of Puja considerably. I would go as far as to assert that study of these concepts within the context of what they mean in puja is superior to mere study of them in isolation, since in puja, you can begin to gain insights into how correspondences and concepts relate to each other.

The Primacy of Three-fold Experience

The Three-fold nature of experience is a primary concept in Tantric Magical Psychology. For example, the tantric understanding of perception is three-fold:

The measure - The object to measure - The act of measuring.

Other significant triplicities include: Creator (Brahma) Preserver (Visnu) Destroyer (Siva); The three worlds, the three times, the 3 gunas, Sun Moon Fire.

Thus, by performing puja, we are moving through a three-fold relationship with the chosen deity;

(a) Identifying the deity as originating from within

(b) Externalizing the deity, in order to experience it as separate from us

(c) Re-Identifying with the deity in the light of the above.

The object, or aim of Puja is to establish communion between devotee and deity.

I occasionally hear the comment that Tantric magic is 'too devotional' in its character. This, I feel, springs from a misunderstanding of the nature of devotional magic and the tantric conception of the relationship between practitioner and deity. In Puja, I was taught by my guru (50p in the swear box!) to firstly to internally identify with the chosen deity, through meditation, visualization, mantra, and Nyasa (the identification of different parts of the body with deities, through touch). Secondly, to externalize the deity by breathing or projecting it into a form (a statue or other

image) in order to 'worship' the god or goddess, and finally, to reabsorb them after the completion of worship. The tantric conception of deities is that they are both transcendent and immanent. From a tantric perspective, the Universe is the embodiment of the transcendent Shiva and the immanent Shakti. Existence flows from, and is, their union.

In performing puja, my aim is often to offer a sacrifice to a deity, in order that she or he will grant a boon. Litanies to deities often speak of them 'making the gestures of dispelling fears and granting boons'. I currently interpret the word 'fears' as the obstacles ('Kleshas') which hold me back from attaining the bliss of the god-state (more on this in a mo'); the phrase 'granting boons' is the power of the god or goddess to assist me in the removal (or, more accurately, integration) of those fears. The underlying process in this approach to puja is similar to that which underlies most forms of ritual magic. A desire-form is made conscious (i.e. stated), and separated from the ego-complex by offering or sacrificing it to the god or goddess who is the focus of the puja. Finally, the god-form is reabsorbed, and the realization of the desire-form takes place organically (some might prefer the term, 'unconsciously' here, but I feel this is too limiting a concept).

So how does this work in practice? Last year, I performed a Ganesha Puja with the general aim of finding myself the 'right' job. Not merely, 'a job', but the most appropriate for me. Since I'm now writing this article at work, you can be assured that this was successful. However, what I feel is just as significant here is that the puja, and daily meditation on Ganesha enabled me to 'dispell the fears' around not finding a job, and everything that goes with that - which naturally involved a good degree of willed self-work as well as the relaxed certainty that 'something would turn up'.

To worship a deity, a man must become the Self of that deity through dedication, breath-control, and concentration until his body becomes the deity's abode.

Gãndharva Tantra

I feel that some of the squeamishness that surrounds this kind of devotional magic is due to the general background of monotheistic Christianity in modern occultism. After all, it's one thing for magicians to invoke one god for one purpose, and another god for another, but once you start invoking the same god for everything, it starts to look like religion (or mania) - which raises hackles in some quarters. The major Indian deities however, are so multivalent in their aspects and forms that it is quite possible to do this. It also means that the tendency of western occultists to categorize gods on the basis of the Tree of Life becomes unstuck. Ganesha is a good example. One might argue that he has a Jupiterean aspect, as he is associated with wealth. However, he is also Mercurial, since he is a scribe. He also battles demons (Mars), rules obstacles (Saturn), and is often given as the guardian of the Muladhara Chakra (Earth). He has at least 32 popular forms and there are more that can be discovered through practical experience.

I have discussed devotional puja at length since it is the major approach I have used to Tantric ritual so far. This is not to say that there are no other forms. In The Earth Mother (1989), Pupul Jayakar describes a "Witches' Spell" from the Atharva Veda which involves familiar elements such as the creation of an image of the target of the spell, the recitation of mantra over a period of days, and so forth:

> *"To propitiate the goddess, rites were enjoined for the preparation of a Kunda or fire-pot, which took the form of a yantra, symbolic of the yoni. An oblation of Ghee (Clarified Butter) and brown sugar was offered to the Kunda. The witch put on garlands of red, sweet-smelling oleander, wore red garments, and lay facing South. The mantra, called the whisper spell, was then used to invoke:*
>
> *'Om reverence Rudra, Om, O pungent one, thou of the pungent leaf, blessed, Asuri red-dish one, thou of the red garment, O daughter of Atharvan, none-terrific one, non-terrific wonder-worker, smite, smite, burn, burn, cook, cook, crush, crush, so long burn so long cook until you have brought (name) into my power. Svaha.'*
>
> Jayakar, p60.

The above litany is used to invoke the 'Asuri Woman' - a form of the goddess Durga.

A more extreme form of ritual is related in Sudhir Kakar's *Shamans, Mystics & Doctors* (1991). This is sadhana (practice) directed towards a demoness named Karna. The sadhna is carried out over three days before the new moon. It requires ten days of preparation, and a further ten days of ritual after the sadhana is completed. For ten days the practitioner abstains from all the sacred acts prescribed for a Brahmin. He did not clean his teeth, change his clothes, and used the same dirty plate for each meal. In the three days of the sadhana itself, the practitioner satisfies his thirst by drinking his own urine, and satisfies his hunger by eating his own feces. On the first night of the sadhana, the practitioner locks the doors of his house. He lights eleven large oil lamps in his room. He wears a string of fifty-four bones which he has dug up from the cremation ground at night, and holds a similar string in his hands. Facing south, he begins to recite (japa) a mantra 115 times. He urinates and defacates without breaking the repetition, and rubs the shit and piss over his body. Finally, the practitioner relates how he is visited by "an attractive woman, twenty-five to thirty years old, completely naked...". She sits next to him, fondles his penis, smears both their bodies with his feces, and disappears when he has finished the recitation of the mantra. On the third day, she "incited" him to have intercourse with her. Upon commencing his final period of japa, she appears again, sits down on his lap, and defecates & urinates all over him, again, smearing him body with her urine and feces. She then tells the practitioner "Whenever I want intercourse I'll come to you and you will have to satisfy my desire. Whenever you ask a question I'll whisper the answer in your ear." Kakar's correspondent writes that, as a result of this sadhana, he can no longer perform the sacred tasks and rituals of a Brahmin, but that his astrology business has boomed, due to the powers of the demoness in giving him knowledge of his clients' past and future and in drawing more clients towards him.

This ritual is interesting for several reasons. Firstly, it violently confronts and transgresses orthodox Hindu taboos concerning cleanliness and ritual purity - in fact I would think it would have a similar effect on most westerners! Secondly, this sadhana is based again, on identification which the entity which is the focus of the practice. The practitioner behaves in such a manner as to become acceptable to the demoness, his practice culminating in a kind of hieros gamos which, for the Brahmin, is as shameful as it is ecstatic. The result of this sadhana is that, while he becomes prosperous, he has effectively become an 'outcast' in society.

Ananda and Lila

The term 'lila' is used to denote divine play, sport or dalliance, and the gods are often referred to as being in this state in their relationship to the Universe. In aspiring to the divine play of the gods, the tantric seeks to become unfettered and unconditioned. In playing, you leave behind the perception of the 'ordinary' world, and enter a magical world. As divine players in this world, the gods are joyous, graceful and spontaneous beings, taking delight in the universe. Related to this idea of divine play is that of 'ananda' - which is usually translated as meaning 'bliss'. When we try and approach bliss in this sense, we need to be quite careful with terms and distinctions. For example, many people think of bliss states such as samadhi as being characterized by a fugue-like withdrawal from the world. But the tantric goal is not about retreating from the world, but enjoying it. For myself, I rather like the definition of Ananda given in Kakar, p166-167, by a correspondent:

"The true tantrik is always in a state of nonsuppression and enjoyment. The purpose of every moment of life is to experience ananda. Ananda is active enjoyment of everything that comes your way. … A tantrik has only those desires which the environment is ready, willing and in a position to satisfy. This is not because he denies any of his wishes or rationalizes them later, but because he has developed his capacity for attention and is intensely aware of where he is and what he is doing at every moment of time."

Hence Tantric magic places great stress on enhancing awareness of one's senses, of one's physical presence, of the world around us, of identifying and integrating the fetters of habit, restriction, attachment - the 'obstacles' which impede us from experiencing ananda. Tantra is a path of Psychosomatic Alchemy, which starts with the basic premises of sensuality and worship, pleasure, energy and compassion. This alchemy is dynamic, demonstrating that the body is a seething cauldron of activity: neural firestorms flicker across the brain in milliseconds; complex molecular transactions take place within an instant, the heart sheds energy like a furnace. Tantric magic encompasses all the so-called techniques of Gnosis, from silent contemplation of a cobweb at dawn to frenzied ecstasy. One of the core virtues of Tantra is Compassion, arising out of empathic identity with the species, the Earth, and beyond. This embedded 'openness' to the world is metamorphic, deepening vision, strengthening the heart. As such, systems of control based on fear and blind obedience have always viewed Tantra as suspicious, if not seditious.

Three: The science of extremes

It has been observed that Tantra is the Indian equivalent to Satanism - in that Tantra is opposed to the orthodox Vedantic culture in a similar way that Satanism is held to 'oppose' Christian culture. While this identification may be distasteful to some readers, I would propose that this is entirely appropriate if one considers how Tantra is viewed by the modern Indian authorities. Scholars too, particularly those working in the shadow of Sir John Woodroffe (Arthur Avalon), have consistently attempted to banish the magical, superstitious, and sexual associations of Tantra - what Jeffrey Kripal (quite rightly in my view) terms its 'seediness' - and elevate it towards being a 'respectable' Sanskrit philosophy. Some writers, both Indian and Western, are to this day insisting that the lingam and the yoni have nothing to do with the penis and vagina. Moreover, Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty points out that whilst Tantra is a reality for its initiates, it is nonetheless a fantasy for most Hindus - a mythology of repressed desires used by orthodox Hindus in a similar way that some Christians project a Satanic mythology - as a psychological dark mirror.

Despite the current enthusiasm for elements of Tantric practice in New Age circles, Tantra will always remain inherently 'dodgy' due to its emphasis on, and embracing of extremes of behaviour which often seem, to the Western observer, to be contradictory. Moreover, Tantra is still very much shrouded in mystery, despite the plethora of populist books on the subject. The scholastic study of Tantra is difficult due to the 'closed-mouth' stance of its adherents and its esoteric culture. Like chaos magicians, it is often difficult to obtain a consensus from Tantrics about any aspect of belief or technique. Although many fine studies of Tantric ideas are available, with few exceptions these are restricted to the textually-based philosophical traditions such as Kashmir Saivism. Gopinath Kaviraj, author of *Tantrika Sadhana & Siddhanta*, remarks that historical research alone cannot get to grips with the 'deep knowledge' of Tantra, as to do this requires an 'inner gnosis'. In other words, Tantra cannot be understood fully from the outside.

Taboo & Transgression

Tantra intentionally reverses and challenges brahamanic culture through its images, symbolism, and deliberate ritual use of impure substances (i.e. meat, wine) and illicit acts which both transgress and transcend traditional Hindu normative values. Whilst it is often claimed that Tantra is an anti-Vedic tradition, it should be understood that

the Tantric acts of transgression only retain their power in relation to the orthodox social culture and religious tradition. For example, let's say we have a young Brahmin who wishes to learn the secrets of Tantra. The Tantrik might say, "Okay, you bring a bottle of wine, I'll bring a girl and some raw goat meat and we'll meet down the cremation-ground at midnight." This simple sentence is replete with transgressions for the Brahmin - the cremation ground at midnight - the abode of demons, hobgoblins and ghosts - the invitation to drink wine and eat meat - and the invitation to partake of sexual intercourse 'outside' of the rules of cast and society. The tantrik initiation, in these terms, places the initiate 'outside' the mainstream society.

This alone becomes problematic for westerners interested in Tantric practice. For one thing, it is difficult for us to understand how shocking tantric practices must have been from the perspective of an initiated Brahmin, who could be sent into a frenzy of self-purification at the mere *sight* of a low-cast person. Meat and wine are simply not taboos in the west - we might choose abstention from them and thus imbue them with power for ritual purposes, but they are not *taboo* in the same, deep way that they would have been for a Brahmin. So it behoves the western tantrika to choose other forms of transgression. The recognition and exploration of one's own, personal taboos and limitations are an important element of magical development, and the primacy which tantrik magic places on this work - *Klesha-smashing* - as it is sometimes known, is for me a strength of this approach. It would be a mistake, however, to confuse transgression with opposition. Although tantric initiation places the individual, effectively, beyond the norms of his or her society, this should not be taken to indicate that the tantrik is necessarily *opposed* to that society. Indian culture has, or at least had a place for those whose way of life was *beyond* the norm. Tantrik initiates could be both feared as powerful sorcerers but at the same time, respected as holy men. Again, a strong element in tantrik philosophy is the idea of *service* to one's fellows. Western occultism is littered with individuals who feel themselves, by the mere virtue of practising magick, to be somehow elevated from their fellow beings. The romance of being an 'outsider' is attractive and seductive, particularly when it becomes a shield against confronting one's own shortcomings. Anyone can declare themselves to be an outsider in the safety of their own home - it's easy. In contrast, Tantric cults such as the Pasupatas actively drew to themselves the contempt and abhorrence of their fellow men by bathing in dirt, behaving like madmen, and masturbating in public - in order to create in themselves, it is said, a condition of passionless detachment from the world. Pasupatas worked hard at drawing censure from other people, through the 'six-Doors' (*dvaras*). These were: snoring or acting as if asleep when not; shaking ones limbs as though afflicted by disease; walking as if crippled; making amorous gestures openly to women; acting foolishly, and uttering senseless words. Not usually the behaviour one associates with wannabe-outsiders, who are mostly far too concerned with taking themselves (and being taken) seriously.

Asceticism & Eroticism

The tradition of withdrawal from the world through ascetic practices is a central and enduring theme in Indian metaphysics. The renunciation of the world in favour of an isolated life in forest or cave has been traced by scholars to as far back as 800 B.C., (around the time when the Upanishads were codified) although there is evidence to suggest that the methodologies of yoga were known to the civilizations of the Indus Valley (2500-1800 B.C..) While some sects and cults have practised severe austerities, Tantric cults are generally characterised by an avoidance of ascetic practises which are rooted in denial of the world, or of mortification of the flesh for its own sake.

The goal of the Tantric sadhu is not so much to transcend the world of form, but to immerse himself in it, all the better to enjoy the love-play of the Goddess. In the image of All that exists flows from, and at the same time *is*, the union of Shiva-Shakti as represented by the image of Ardhanishvara, the twin poles of Tantric sadhana, renunciation and erotic bliss, are united. The route to super-consciousness - "the realisation that everything is alive and significant" (as William S. Burroughs put it), or, in the words of Ramakrishna, "She Herself has become Everything", requires both periods of ascetic withdrawal and erotic union. Shiva is both the Mahayogi and the lover of the Goddess, spending thousands of years in ascetic withdrawal, or equally, in blissful union with the Goddess. In some tantric schools, initiates spent a long period using ascetic practices to 'purify' the bodymind in order to prepare themselves for becoming suitable receptacles for the reception of divine force.

The idea that ascetic practices (in moderation) have value seems to be difficult for some Western magicians to accept. Western culture is overly attached to instant gratification and obsessed with being 'sexually' successful. Being sexually active is closely related to self-esteem in our culture, to the extent that admitting that one has problems with one's sexual feelings & identifications is something of a taboo in itself - particularly in the magical subculture where there is a common belief that 'successful magick' equates with a high sex-drive. Our sexuality is felt to be one of the most private areas of our lives, yet it is highly influenced by 'external' conditions. In this kind of atmosphere - 'not having sex' can become as much of an act of magick as any ritualized copulation, and probably more productive in the long run if one is simply responding to 'surface' gratifications, rather than actually examining one's underlying complex of motivations and *kleshas*. Moreover, ascetic practices are useful for sensitizing the bodymind to subtle nuances of experience and sensation that would otherwise pass unnoticed.

Goddesses & sluts

Tantra has been much-acclaimed by modern neo-pagan writers due to the apparent equality which it gives to the god & goddess, male & female practitioner. Much has been said about the similarities of belief and practice between Tantra and modern Wicca, for example. I feel that there is an element here of the Western eye looking for reflections of what it wants to see. All too often, there is the assumption that goddess-oriented cultures give equal prominence to women in their societies. Even a cursory glance at modern India will explode this myth. Whilst tantric cults have welcomed female members, most researchers agree that it is inordinately difficult for women to follow a tantric path. Whilst female gurus are not uncommon, there is relatively little historical material available on them, and the most famous is "the Bhairavi", the tantric guru of Ramakrishna. She recognized Ramakrishna's condition as one of potential sainthood rather than madness, and initiated him (less than successfully in some areas, according to Kripal) into tantric sadhana. Moreover, the majority of tantric texts are written from a male perspective or reflect male physiology. Some tantric texts speak of the efficacy of intercourse with low-caste women. This can be read as a further feint at the transgression of caste-norms. However, it was generally believed that low-born women were more 'animal-like' in their passions - less able to control themselves. This sounds very like the male fantasy of the woman who is continually sexually available - willing to have intercourse with any male, anywhere, at any time. Further, in some tantric schools, the classification of a person's disposition as predominantly animal-like (*pashu*) is highly judgemental against them. It should not be forgotten that in Indian culture, women may have power (*shakti*) but

men possess authority. O'Flaherty discusses this at length in *Women, Androgynes & other Mythical Beasts*. She points out (p127) that the use of a low-caste woman in tantric ritual acts to 'balance out' the power relationships between human and divine; male and female. The male practitioner receives beneficial female power for himself, whilst retaining his authority. Contact with a divinity, particularly a powerful, aggressive, erotic goddess, is particularly dangerous in Indian psychology. In orthodox Hinduism, danger lies in having contact with that which is more powerful than oneself. Just as human-divine contact is dangerous, it is held to be 'harmful' for men to have contact with women - particularly older women - a popular belief in India and possibly one reason why the various goddesses are often worshipped in the form of teenage girls.

The complexities of sexual politics is also important for Western magicians. It is all too easy for men to 'idealise' women as goddess-figures, placing them on pedestals, whilst neglecting to examine how they regard women in their day-to-day lives. Thus one still encounters male magicians who are 'looking for a shakti, or scarlet woman' very much in the sense of acquiring a magical tool to assist them in their 'Great Work'. Heavens forbid that the 'shakti' might have her own ideas, or will in the matter! The writer Louis T. Culling even went so far as to recommend that male magicians choose female partners who have no knowledge of sexual magick. One presumes that the converse - that female magicians could 'use' males who were ignorant of the Great Work as assistants did not even occur to the advocates of this approach.

As I mentioned in part one of this series, the general assumption I most often encounter is that of Tantric magick being equated with sexual shennanigans. So men are often 'eager' to hear about what our group gets up to, whilst women are often wary. After it becomes apparent that orgia is not on the menu, men tend to be disappointed whilst women seem to be somewhat relieved. One's understanding of Tantra, as much any other subject, will be coloured by the expectations one brings to it, and what one is seeking. It should also be noted that one's understanding of a subject changes over time, as one's depth of experience changes, sometimes as a consequence of magical activity. An obvious point perhaps, but one that is easily forgotten. This is perhaps one reason why there are so many injunctions that Tantric sadhana should not be carried out without a Guru. It is not so much that the Guru imparts secrets, but that the Guru gives one another perspective on an issue or situation. Sudhir Kakar, in *Shamans, Mystics & Doctors*, gives a somewhat amusing example of a conversation between a young (16 year-old) student of Tantra and his guru:

"Can you tell me under what circumstances you get an erection?"

"Guru, I don't know. But I often have an erection."

"When you get an erection, what do you feel about it?"

"Well, I feel pleasure but I am also uncomfortable."

"What do you do when you get the erection?"

"Sometimes I go to the bathroom, run a hand over it till sperm is released and then I feel good."

"Yes, that's fine. This is one way of doing it. But this shouldn't last. Would you like to use your hand forever?"

"No, what I'd like to do is find a woman, put my erection in her and drive as hard as possible."

"What do you think the woman thinks about that?"

"I don't understand what you mean."

"Well she is not dead, is she? Would you have intercourse with a corpse?"

"No."

"Then she must somehow participate in it. She must have something for it, mustn't she? Why should she do it?..."

(Kakar, p157)

For Tantrics, as with other magical traditions, it is the *intention* powering an action which is all-important. Smoking dope, drinking and fucking anything that moves does not necessarily a sadhu make. The goal of Tantric practice is the radical deconstruction of the individual, in order to attain the ideal of the *sahaja* state - that of natural spontaneity - unfettered by self-limitation or delusion. Most Indian metaphysical traditions (apart from the Buddhists and the Materialists) believe that this is the primal human condition, which can be re-attained through the various practises and disciplines of sadhana. As with any such ideal state, it is highly debatable whether the sahaja state is fully attainable (particularly when one considers that it can take years of therapy or self-exploration just to 'digest' the Karma of one's childhood). What one does along the 'way' of course, is all-important. Having met, over the years, numerous individuals who claim to have 'slain their egos', 'crossed the abyss', 'attained Godhead' or become 'Maguses', I sometimes feel it is more productive to 'forget' the goal and concentrate on correct practice. If nothing else, keeping the goal in the region of being relatively unattainable breeds an attitude of humility, a quality which seems to be absent from the would be 'god-like' individuals that one encounters from time to time.

Four: The guru—fakir or faker?

The figure of the Guru - Spiritual Guide, Master or Teacher has been greatly influential on Western attitudes to the esoteric, and remains somewhat controversial. The popular image of the guru was successfully lampooned in the recent BBC Indian comedy, "Goodness Gracious Me" as "His Divine Calmness Sri Onion Bhaji" - a rather portly, white-bearded Indian man, exuding benign grace and mouthing empty spiritual platitudes to a fawning western audience. Yet despite the prevailing mood of cynicism towards spiritual authority figures, which has pervaded even unto the lofty heights of the New Age community, people entering esoteric studies (whatever their form) still seek out 'teachers', and there seems to be plenty of individuals who are still eager to be known as 'teachers'. Some say that the very idea of having 'magical teachers' is redundant in the modern, information-rich age. I would argue that this is not the case, but that we perhaps need to re-evaluate our expectations of what esoteric teaching is about. Teachers can be something more than 'keepers of knowledge'. In our information-rich culture, the role of the teacher shifts from someone who doles out knowledge to someone who may be able to help us steer a path through that information - helping us to sort out what is relevant for us, and how to make it meaningful to our lives.

To begin with, I shall sketch out my own perception of the role of the Guru within the Tantric corpus. It may seem to be somewhat paradoxical that a system in which the guru figure plays such a primary role turns out fiercely independent, individualistic magicians. As a broad generalisation, I would say that the primary task of the guru towards the aspirant is the awakening of the latent knowledge of divinity within - thus opening the way for the aspirant's own, integral realisation of Self. Although it is recognised in the various Indian schools and systems that this awakening to self-realisation may occur spontaneously, unmediated by any external source, it is acknowledged that such occurrences are rare. Further, it is generally accepted by most Hindu schools of thought that the liberating divine grace which flows from the primal source is not directly accessible to all. It requires a mediating factor which, on a human level is a Guru, acting as an agent of the divine will. The aspirant is often enjoined to consider the guru as an incarnation of the Supreme Lord. This does not however, imply a slavish obedience to the guru as it is so often perceived by Westerners as the role of the Guru is to facilitate the aspirant's development towards true independence. It is also recognised that the Guru plays an important role in refining the aspirant's self-realization. There is a common misconception that moments of illumination equate with permanent enlightenment and liberation from limitations. It is well-recognised by tantrics that 'awakening' alone does not equate with integral

self-realization and that further exertion is required - in the form of the physical & mental disciplines of sadhana.

The Guru can also play an important role in assisting the aspirant to recognise just what is happening during the process of 'awakening'. In "Kali's Child", Jeffrey Kripal points out that it was "the Bhairavi" - Ramakrishna's female Tantric Guru who recognised the saint's behaviour not as signs of madness, but as his struggle to awaken towards self-realization. Of course, doubt can be cast upon this as much as any other aspect of the Guru's role - after all it was 'Bishop' Leadbeater who recognised the youthful Krishnamurti's 'divine potential' - although after the scandals which later rocked the Theosophical Society concerning Leadbeater's fondness for teaching young boys the sadhana of mutual masturbation, many have said that Leadbeater was probably not so much attracted by Krishnamurti's aura, but his more physical attributes. Nevertheless, it is undeniable (at least to anyone personally familiar with the traumas of 'spiritual awakening') that it is highly useful to talk about one's strange feelings and moods with someone who is sympathetic and can at the very least say "this is normal, you're not going mad."

It should be recognised that just as there are 'dodgy' gurus out there, there are equally 'dodgy' aspirants. As Robert Anton Wilson once quipped "A disciple is an asshole looking for a human being to attach itself to." Just as modern occultism is rife with fraudulent teachers and masters, it is equally rife with undiscriminating individuals who are looking for surrogate parent-figures to smooth away the complexities of the world. Indeed, Sudhir Kakar has proposed that the appeal of contemporary 'popular' Gurus, both in India and elsewhere, could be related to their role as parent figures. He typifies the infamous Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh as an 'indulgent' father-figure.

Within the New Age Community (generally castigated by occultists as the source of much uncritical acceptance of spiritual dogmas) there has arisen a so-called "new paradigm" which is decidedly anti-authoritarian. Exponents of this "paradigm" include Joel Kramer & Diana Alstead, authors of "The Guru Papers: Masks of Authoritarian Power" and the contemporary mystic, Andrew Harvey. Kramer & Alstead attack the 'institution' of the guru system, not only on the basis of recent scandals, but that it is inherently abusive and authoritarian. They also attack what they call "renunciate morality" - the ideals of selflessness, egolessness and self-sacrifice as being dangerously flawed - that such ideas lead people to doubt themselves and so become susceptible to manipulative figures. The case of Andrew Harvey is perhaps more interesting. Harvey, author of "A Journey in Ladakh" and "A Spiritual Awakening" describes himself as "a recovering guruholic". He is notable for first becoming a fervent devotee of Mother Meera, (an Indian-born and German-based Spiritual Teacher who is proclaimed by her followers to be an avatar of the Goddess) and then publicly rejecting her due to her apparent homophobia. Harvey is also a critic of the 'Guru System', saying that it "keeps people infantile, it keeps them slaves; it siphons off the sacred energy that needs to be poured into social justice and politics." I understand that the 'emergence' of this new 'paradigm' has led to a good deal of debate and anguish amongst New Agers. At the core of this argument is the implicit idea that the popular perception of Gurus as 'pure' beings who have transcended human limitations is an unattainable myth. It follows then, that if the idea of 'pure beings' is a fallacy, then the ideal of attaining such a state as a result of one's own spiritual practice is called into question. Harvey makes this very clear:

"I think that the true spiritual guide admits that he or she is still in process, that they are always aware of their own shadow and of the limitations of their upbringing, their cultural conditioning, their particular religious views. The true spiritual guide never claims to be unified with the divine."

Damning as this critique appears to be, I do not personally believe that it totally invalidates the function of spiritual guides, be they termed teachers or Gurus. Indeed, they say more about the perceptions that westerners have imposed onto the Guru-figure and the role of the Guru in transmitting esoteric knowledge. A message posted to an Internet discussion forum (following the response to an interview with Andrew Harvey) makes some telling points:

"Look at how much energy is directed toward Andrew Harvey, invalidating what he has to say: so much anger toward him, and so little toward Mother Meera for her cruelty and hypocrisy! I recognized all these patterns of denial from my own experience, and I suspect many incest and other trauma survivors did too. Gurus are falling like dominos these days. How many more gurus must fall before we re-evaluate our relationships with gurus, therapists, and spiritual teachers? even, our relationships with each other?

When an abuse happens, more than anything the victim needs a community willing to hear her experience, to know the truth. This, unfortunately, is a rare experience indeed for abused children, for incest victims; for victims of sexual abuse and harassment by gurus, spiritual teachers, priests, psychotherapists, Supreme Court Justice nominees; for battered wives, ex-political prisoners, holocaust survivors, Vietnam veterans, trauma survivors. No one really wants to hear about trauma and abuse. This isolation is usually the worst injury of all.

As a "healing" community, I think our greatest commitment must be to face and know the extremity of human abuse; to do so requires facing our constant tendency toward denial, about others and ourselves. The dynamics of abuse permeate our relationships, our families, our politics; but let's start by looking at all the guru and therapist abuse in our midst. I'd like to see the psycho-spiritual community, and your magazine, take this subject on. Is it really healthy to "surrender" to a guru, spiritual teacher, therapist? Are these "chaste" spiritual communities really healthy? Maybe sexuality is the litmus test of a community's integrity."

(quoted from the Indian Skeptic page)

Harvey, I think has made an interesting point when he speaks of the recognition of cultural bias and religious background. Many spiritual 'authorities' do make pronouncements that are obviously biased by their cultural & religious background. I am occasionally asked for my views on Dadaji's (the founder of AMOOKOS) injunction that the Tantric life is most definitely 'not' for anyone who is not heterosexual. The question is put to me that "shouldn't a guru have risen above such a limited viewpoint?" To which I can only reply that Dadaji, like any other figure, has to be taken within the cultural context of his time. Any person can only challenge an issue or belief by recognising that something is an issue in the first place. I don't think it is appropriate to instantly leap to the supposition that because he said this, Dadaji was therefore homophobic and therefore anything else he said or wrote is immediately suspect. The whole thing just wasn't an issue the way it is nowadays. Whilst I do not know the full tale of Harvey's allegations of homophobia against Mother Meera, Mark Matousek, author of "Sex Death Enlightenment" says that he visited Mother Meera with Andrew Harvey, and that the accusation of homophobia is unjustified:

"I do know that the idea that she's homophobic is completely ridiculous. For God's sake, we were served breakfast in bed together in her house."

(Quoted from an Interview with Cliff Bostock published in Creative Loafing, Atlanta)

Indian attitudes to sexuality - particularly female sexuality & homosexuality are vastly different to those of modern western liberals. We should not forget that cultural bias cuts both ways before accepting uncritically what eastern spiritual figures say about modern lifestyles. Of course, 'uncritical acceptance' is all too often the case, and I am very much reminded of a comment attributed to a modern Buddhist teacher that one shouldn't leave one's common sense behind along with one's shoes at the door.

The idea that the Guru or Teacher is somehow flawed or displays all-too-human weaknesses is apparently a hard lesson for some people to learn. I recall my first meeting with an elder magician who was later, to become for me, a teacher-figure. An old man carrying a bizarre magical staff and exuding an other-worldly air. The way he talked and the way others deferred to him (or so it seemed to me) led me to believe that I had finally encountered an 'advanced adept' I could learn from. Fortunately, I was soon disabused of this idealistic projection, as the 'adept' launched into a story of how he had upset some Irishmen in a pub and that, sensing imminent confrontation, he had gone into the toilets, ripped off one of the "bog-chains" - which had a heavy porcelain handle, and gone back into the pub whirling it over his head and shouting "Come on, then!" This tale initially caused me some confusion, but quickly led me away from putting him on a pedestal. As I grew to know this elder magician, we had many interesting conversations. He never accepted the label of "teacher" saying instead that we were brother-sorcerers, exchanging information. When I went to him with an idea for some new ritual or technique, his reply to my question "What'll happen if I do this?" was invariably along the lines of "I don't know - try it out and tell me about it afterwards." Thus, rather than telling me what I ought, or ought not to do, he enabled me to find the confidence to strike out on my own magical path, and always qualified his interpretations of my experience as being merely his own individual perspective and that he did not see himself as an 'authority'. In retrospect, I would characterise my relationship with this elder magician as that between a student and mentor.

The term *mentor* derives from the Greek, where Mentor is the counsellor of Telemachus, son of Odyesseus. It has become synonymous with the notions of 'a trusted friend', an adviser, counsellor or teacher. Mentor's task was not merely to educate Telemachus, but to prepare and develop him for the responsibilities he would have to face as Odyesseus's heir. A mentor is someone who offers knowledge, insights or perspectives that are especially useful to the other person. For me, what characterises the core of the mentoring relationship as opposed to the popular view of the Teacher or Guru is that it is an *intimate* relationship, rather than a distant one. To be effective, the mentor must respect the uniqueness of the other person, and seek to empower them by assisting them in the development of their own abilities.

We can see the results of dysfunctional teaching when we meet so-called magicians who appear to be little more than mirror-reflections of their teachers, who lack independent voices and hold the world at bay with their belief-systems which (as Peter J. Carroll once quipped) "act not even as crutches for the feeble, but broken legs for the incapable". The tendency to teach magic to others 'cookbook style,' rather than encouraging individuals to *twist* techniques and theories so that they are relevant

to their immediate life experience, is responsible for much of the blinkered, narrow thinking of many modern occultists. I suspect that this is due to the fact that 'teachers' have a position to cling to, which involves keeping students around them rather than letting them go off and pursue their own interests. Some of the best Mentors in comparison are those who view the mentoring process as a learning experience for themselves. The idea of ageless wisdom, passed down from Mage to Neophyte is an endearing one, but is inaccurate in a world of constant, accelerating change. Mentoring requires both work and responsibility for both parties in the relationship. It is a *partnership* between Mentor & student, based on mutual respect. Another quote from Robert Anton Wilson is apposite to the discussion, that - "communication is only possible amongst equals." Both Mentor & Student contribute & gain equally from the relationship.

However, having said this, it must also be recognised that both Students and potential Mentors need to be clear about what *expectations* they bring to the relationship. For the relationship to be effective, these expectations must be made *explicit*.

Mentoring is based on a friendly, informal relationship, and any attempts to extract firm promises from either side are likely to end badly. This is not to say however, that some form of *agreement* between Student and Mentor is not useful. If both parties have made their expectations from the relationship explicit, then an agreement can act to remind both parties of specific objectives which have arisen from their mutual work, and secondly, it can be drawn on occasionally to *clarify* the boundaries of the relationship to both parties.

This latter point is particularly useful in Magical Mentoring, where it is easy for the Mentor's influence to extend beyond the boundaries of the immediate magical relationship - and often does, under a variety of guises and justifications. The desire for this can come from Mentor or Student, or may even arise unbidden from the sharing of intense magical experiences. Similar problems are not unknown between therapists and clients, nurses and patients, or teachers and pupils. Yes, this situation is open to abuse, but need not necessarily arise.

If we turn to ancient, rather than contemporary views of the Guru, it becomes fairly apparent that studying with a Guru was often a traumatic process. There are many stories about Zen and Tantric masters behaving in a way that is vastly different to the modern idea of the other-worldly saint. AShN 55, writing in Nuit-Isis Vol. II No.1, recounts the story of a Zen master who met every one of his pupil's questions with a blow from a heavy cane. Eventually, the pupil shouts "Enough!" and jumps up and snaps the cane, and then realises how unnecessary his slavish obedience to his master was. It seems to me that the old masters were all too aware of the tendency of aspirants to put their guides on pedestals and deliberately led them from away from being dependent, often by recourse to rather extreme tactics. AShN 55 also points out in the same article that Matsyendranath, when disturbed from his meditations by would-be followers, responded by "getting drunk, wanking and hurling his shit at onlookers, only teaching those who remained!"

There are also a number of stories centred around the deeds of Goraknath, the primary pupil of Matsyendranath, the founder of the Adinatha sect of Tantrics. Goraknath, it is said, could raise the dead, but unlike other great Spiritual Masters, he often killed people first in order to demonstrate this power! One of my favourites is a tale featuring Goraknath and his master, Matsyendranath. On their wanderings, they came across a village where the local Rajah was overseeing the hanging of a wrong-doer. As chance would have it, the wrong-doer managed to escape his guards

and quickly made himself scarce. Thwarted, the angry Rajah declared that he was going to hang the two tallest men in the crowd that had gathered - which of course was Matsyendranath and Goraknath. As soon as they were brought before the Rajah, the two began to argue about who should be hanged first. Matsyendranath argued that, as he was the master, he should be hung first. Goraknath disagreed vehemently. Intrigued by this unusual eagerness in his victims, the Rajah asked them why they argued. The two replied that, by consulting the holy books, the sages and the movement of the stars, they had determined that the first person to be hung in this place would go straight to Nirvana. Hearing this, the Rajah declared that if anyone was most deserving of such a fate, it was to be him and none other. So he went willingly to the gallows and pupil and master went on their way! Legends such as these illustrate that although Matsyendranath and Goraknath were credited with superhuman powers and wisdom, they were not un-worldly 'pure beings' in the way that modern Guru-figures are expected to be. This is very much a modern conception and I think, one which perhaps has overly been influenced by Christian-based attitudes. It's too easy to slip into the attitude that someone who is revered as an incarnation of the divine or is an intermediary between the individual aspirant and the divine source is god-like in the modern, Christian sense - distant, uninvolved and perfect. This is vastly different towards, for example, the Indian-Tantric view of divinities. The Gods act from the position of divine sport or play (Lila). Look at Shiva for instance. He smokes dope, behaves like a madman, hangs out with demons and corpses and is definitely an instance of a "god behaving badly". Personally, I would not be able to take seriously any self-proclaimed Shiva-avatar who didn't know how to party! The critics of the guru-system seem to have ignored the Indian esoteric schools which probably do not appeal to the 'white-light' mentality. I would agree with Kramer & Alstead's critique of "renunciate morality", whilst pointing out that the Tantric scriptures make very clear the limitations of such self-negation and self-mortification.

A long-standing esoteric cliché has it that "when the pupil is ready, the master will appear." It seems to me that there is not enough attention paid to what constitutes 'readiness' and that people are all too eager to rush off and surrender themselves to an authority-figure (be it Guru, therapist or adept) only to be disappointed, when, as Lionel Snell put it, they turn out to have 'bad breath or wandering hands'. As much as we need to re-evaluate the role of the esoteric guide or teacher, we need to recognise our own complicity as individuals in the matter. Occasionally I ask my own tantric guru (who initiated me into the Natha current - but only after we spent a year getting to know each other) to send me a photo so I can revere him ritually. He knows I'm not serious and I know that such requests make him squirm, yet at the same time I am acknowledging the insights, guidance and friendship we have shared over the years, which I freely acknowledge has shaped my magical development. Andrew Harvey, whilst calling for the removal of the Spiritual 'Authority-figure' is quick to point out that whilst people should not (uncritically) put their faith in masters, this does not mean that spiritual development is entirely a solo affair, and that "You absolutely need a community spiritual friends and guides". To which I concur. It is said that when a prince asked Matsyendranath who *his* Guru was, he pointed to the rocks and trees around his place of meditation - which I read as an injunction that one's own experience of life is the greatest Guru, rather than books or super-human, yet distant, authority-figures. Instead of looking for teachers, seek friends and fellowship instead.

Five: The joy of sects

To close this present series of articles, I will take a look at some of the diverse Tantric sects which have flourished in India and their influence. The term sect, in popular usage, implies a specific doctrine, a priesthood, and an exclusive lay following. In India however, the situation was (and remains) much more amorphous, being generally characterised by mutual tolerance between different groups and sects. In ancient times however, it was not unknown for competitions to take place, taking the form of public debates or 'miracle' contests.

The image of the wandering medicant conjures many nuances of mood and meaning in India. Homeless, wandering holy men, with amulets and rudraksa beads around their necks, rhinoceros horn ear-rings, ashes on their foreheads, unkempt hair, singing praises of god, roaring like a bull, behaving like madmen; the appearance of whom in an Indian village could be both an image of profound terror and potency. To the yogi, Nothing is forbidden; he (or she) is free from society and it's moralities. The Yogi is magician-sorcerer, master of alchemy, astrologer, juggler, poet, seducer of mind and heart, and also, an awakened one. Mystical asceticism the aim of which is enlightenment through the mortification of the body was, and remains, a strong tradition in India. After all, both the Gautama Buddha and Mahavira (founder of the Jain sect) doctrines originated from mystery schools where austerities (in various forms) formed the basis for practice.

The figure of the ascetic appears in the oldest Indian literature. The 'mad' *muni* is described in a hymn in the *Rig Veda* as:

The Munis, girdled with the wind,

Wear garments soiled, of yellow hue;

After the wind's course follow they,

When once the gods have entered them.

Vayu has twirled for him; for him

He breaketh things most hard to bend;

When he, the hairy one, has drunk

With Rudra from the poison-cup.

Alexander the Great is reported to have encountered ascetics during his visit to India in 326 BC. Practices of self-denial which continue up to the present day include vows of silence, standing constantly for years, standing on one leg, or holding one arm continuously in the air for years. It is believed that through such practices, both illumination and magical powers may be attained. These naked wonder-workers had their origins in the pre-Vedic traditions which flourished before the Aryan Invasion and the establishment of the Brahminic Tradition.

The Pásupatas

The roots of the Pásupatas are lost in antiquity, although some scholars trace them to a Dravindian Sect, which was driven underground during the Aryan invasion. There does seem to be a general consensus that the Pásupatas were one of the earliest Saivate sects. These ascetics behaved in the fashion of poor madmen; gibbering nonsense, twitching, snoring, limping, making lewd gestures to women, rolling in dirt, bathing in ashes and masturbating in public. By courting disfavour from others, the Pásupatas demonstrated that they had lost their attachment to pride and egotistical tendencies, in emulation of Rudra-Siva.

The name of this sect is derived from Pásupati (or Pashupati) the "Lord of Animals", a title given to the god Rudra (lit. "roarer"). In the convoluted mythic cycles concerning Rudra, it becomes apparent that Rudra is very much a wild god. He accepts all kinds of sacrifices, and often has to make do with the leavings of other sacrifices or libations that would be considered unfit for other gods. It is considered that what may be viewed on the one hand as mythic humiliations of Rudra by the other gods, should be considered as acts of ascetic detachment on the part of Pásupati, who is also acclaimed as the supreme Yogi. Thus, the Pásupatas strove to attract the contempt of others as the path to liberation. Also, the word Pásu or Pashu can be translated as 'beast', and in Tantra this is a classification applied to those who are entirely bound up in the fetters of attachments - the greatest of which is Ignorance. The vow of the Pásupatas was thus to remove the 'noose' of attachments.

The Kapalikas

The Kapalikas used a human skull as a food-bowl, bathed in the ashes from cremations, and were believed to commit human sacrifice. Naturally, they inspired fear and distaste in the orthodox. The term 'Kapalika' can be translated as "bearer of the Skull-Bowl," and these sadhus worshipped Bhairava, the Supreme Beggar, a terrible aspect of Shiva, who carried with him the severed fifth head of Brahma, which he had cut off, using his left thumbnail. In expiation for his sin, Bhairava made the Kapalika vow, which was to roam the world, begging, until the skull fell from his hand.

An associated legend tells of the meeting of Bhairava with a group of forest-dwelling sages. The sages practiced austerities and tended a sacred fire, and they did not recognise Shiva-Bhairava, who appeared as a naked mendicant, carrying only the skull-bowl. He howled and danced, appearing as a madman with a black face. Not only did this startling apparition disturb the rites of the sages, he also attracted their women to him. The sages cursed the lingam of this supreme beggar, and it fell, transformed into a pillar of fire. Some variants of the legend say that another linga appeared to replace that which had fallen, and when the sages saw it, it too was cursed, and fell to earth in a blaze of fire, only to be replaced instantaenously by another linga, which in turn too was cursed, and so on. In another, after the linga fell, Bhairava vanished. In a third version, Bhairava leaves the forest, accompanied by the frenzied women

of the sages. He appears at the house of Vishnu, whereupon his passage is barred by Visvaksena, Vishnu's doorkeeper, who does not recognise Bhairava. The unfortunate doorkeeper is slain by Bhairava, using a trident (the weapon commonly associated with Shiva). Vishnu then caused blood to spurt from his forehead, in an attempt to fill the skull-bowl which Bhairava carried. Bhairava dances on, carrying the corpse of Visvaksena and a skull full of the blood of the preserver, until he reaches the holy city of Varanasi (Banaras), after which he is liberated from the skull vow.

This legend, complex as it is, is woven around the crime of brahminicide - the killing of a Brahmin. Bhairava is one of those paradoxical figures of Indian myth - he has broken all fetters. He has severed one of the heads of the Creator, killed the doorkeeper of Vishnu, the preserver; he dances naked, accompanied by women (and in some versions of the myth, Vishnu), and he appears as a figure of horror and ecstasy. It seems that yogis of the Kapalika sect were somewhat feared, having a reputation for possessing awesome magical powers, but reputed to carry off women and ensnare victims for human sacrifice.

R.N. Saltore recounts a legend that Bhairava once took up residence in the mouth of Goraknath and performed 'religious austerities' there. Goraknath was almost choked, and only managed to expel Bhairava by extolling his glory. Saletore takes this legend as an indication of a possible connection between the Nathas and Kapalikas, which is also noted in passing by M. Magee (author of Tantra Magick, Tantric Astrology, and numerous translations of tantric texts) in his Natha FAQ. In the *Prabodha Chandrodaya*, the following words are attributed to a wizard of the Kapalikas:

> *My necklace and ornaments are of human bones; I dwell among the ashes of the dead and eat my food in human skulls. I look with eyes brightened with the antinomy of Yoga, and believe that the parts of this world are reciprocally different, but that the whole is not different from God. ...After fasting we drink liquor out of the skulls of Brahmans; our sacred fires are fed with the brains and lungs of men mixed up with their flesh, and human beings covered with the fresh blood gushing from the dreadful wound in their throats, are the offerings by which we appease the terrible god (Maha Bhairava).*

In classical literature, Kapalikas are occasionally mocked, appearing as drunkards or evil sorcerers. This view of the Kapalikas as drunkards is, at least on the surface, reinforced by the following quote from the Kulanarva Tantra:

> *"The adept should drink, drink and drink again until he falls to the ground. If he gets up and drinks again, he will be freed from rebirth. His happiness enchants the goddess, Lord Bhairava delights in his swooning, his vomiting pleases all the gods."*

The skull carried by the Kapalika devotee was identified with that of Brahma, and used for eating and drinking from. David Lorenzen, in *The Kapalikas and Kalamukhas* (1972), feels that it was unlikely that the Kapalika devotee would resort first to brahminicide in order to obtain the 'right sort' of skull, although he does say that the skull carried had to be that of a man of noble caste. However, bearing in mind the Kapalikas' reputation for conducting human sacrifice, and their occasional martial ardour, we might draw our own conclusions as to the possible role of ritual murder in the cult's rituals.

The basis of Kapalika devotion appears to have been bhakti in the form of personal devotion to Bhairava. If the critics of the cult are to be believed, then the foremost method of ritual propitiation of Bhairava was through animal or human sacrifice. It was (and probably remains) widely believed that a human sacrifice, being extremely gratifying to primordial deities such as Bhairava or Candi, removes all transgressions from him who makes the offering. Self-sacrifice through austerities, practice of mental and physical disciplines and occasional self-mutilations, also appear to have been practised within the Kapalika cult. Since Bhairava, in the legends, appears to be very much of an ecstatic figure, one might conclude that his worship also included dionysiac revelry. There are also numerous allusions made to the effect that puja employing corpses was part of the cult's practice. Whilst many of these reports are doubtless biased, such practices are well within the corpus of legends relating to Shiva-Bhairava's love of corpse-grounds, and the legions of ghouls, spirits, ghosts and demons who attend him therein. In addition, it is clear that Kapalins practised sex-magical rites and sought the siddhis (achievements - i.e. magical powers) through the practices of Hatha yoga, and, as already noted, were known as sorcerers of much (though often ill-) repute.

The Nathas

The Nathas are considered by some to be the original sect of Tantric Sadhus. The term 'Nath' is a Sanskrit word for Lord or Master and is an epithet of Shiva, as the Lord of Yoga. It is thought that the Nathas became a distinct sect around 300-400 AD. The two must important figures in the legendary history of the Nathas are Matsyendranath, and his disciple, Goraknath. Goraknath is often credited for devising or reintroducing Hatha Yoga in the 8th Century AD, and also the now-familiar concepts of chakras and kundalini. Goraknath became a legendary hero-figure, appearing in many stories as a mysterious stranger, curing the sick, bringing rain, raising the dead. He was later deified as an incarnation of Shiva, and there are several Temples dedicated to him. Many of the Natha subsects revere him as their founder and the Gurkhas, famed in battle for their heroism, worship Gorakhnath as a god and he has many centres of worship in Nepal.

The Nathas were great bards, and many legends were carried by them from village to village in a mixture of song, dance, religion and magic. They also carried the compassionate truths of the Buddha into Saivite doctrine. Their monasteries became repositories of art and literature concerned with magic, palmistry, alchemy, astrology and divine ecstasy.

The Natha cult was itself divided into a variety of sub-sects, of which probably the most well-documented is the Kanphatas (lit. 'split-eared'). These yogis derive their name from an initiation during which a specially-chosen guru splits the central hollows of both ears using a knife or razor. The slits are plugged with wood and when the wounds are healed, large rings are inserted made from a variety of materials such as metal or rhinoceros horn. The origins of this practice can be traced to various sources - such as Shiva's wearing of large earrings, or various legends concerning both Matsyendranath or Gorakhnath. According to some sources, the splitting of the ears is said to open a particular nadi (subtle energy channel) which some yogis claim results in their hearing a constant humming noise. It is worth noting that the large, cylindrical ear-rings are known as 'Kundal' (i.e. 'coiled') recalling the Yoga of Kundalini-Shakti.

George Weston Briggs, in his book *Gorakhnath and the Kanphata Yogis* describes the preliminary initiation of an aspirant to the Sect (the ear-splitting comes later) as follows:

The candidate is first closely confined for a period ranging from forty days to three to six months; that is, for a period of testing satisfactory to the guru. During this time, the candidate is tried as to his resolution and ability to carry out his undertaking. At the same time he is dissuaded from becoming a Yogi, the guru pointing out to him the hardships that his initiation and his life as a Yogi would entail. When the guru is satisfied with the self-control and resolution shown by the candidate, a fast of two or three days may be prescribed. Then, on the day chosen for the initiation ceremony, the candidate bathes and appears before his guru... A two-edged knife, with which the ears are to be split in the second stage of initiation, is presented to the candidate three times, and he is again dissuaded from proceeding with the ceremony.

The knife is drawn into the ground, or laid down before him and the candidate takes the necessary vows over it, swearing not to engage in trade, not to take employment, not to keep dangerous weapons, not to become angry when abused, not to marry, and to protect his ears.

The Nathas and AMOOKOS

The Natha tradition was introduced to the West by Sri Gurudev Mahendranath - Dadaji, the 23rd Adiguru (chief guru) of the Nathas. Dadaji was born in London in April 1911. From his early youth he had a deep interest in the spiritual systems of the world and in his twenties knew Aleister Crowley, meeting him after the infamous Justice Swift libel case. Crowley advised the young seeker to learn about the patterns of the East. But the Spanish Civil War, in which Dadaji fought in the International Bridge, and then the Second World War, intervened. It was 1949 before he left the shores of Britain to arrive penniless in Bombay. Here he was introduced to his guru in the Natha tradition and initiated as a sadhu (holy man). For the next 30 years Dadaji wandered south east Asia as a penniless sannyasin. His travels took him to Bhutan where he received initiation as a lama of the Kargyupta Sect; Malaysia, where he became a Taoist priest and studied the I Ching; Ceylon where he was for a time a bhikkhu of Theravada Buddhism; and Thailand where he lived as a hermit. He was also initiated into the Uttara Kaula tantrik sect and the Sahajiya cult of Varanasi. Dadaji was keen that the wisdom of the Nathas should have a wider exposure, and in 1978 he initiated another Englishman, Sri Lokanath who, in 1982, founded AMOOKOS - the Arcane and Magical Order of the Knights of Shambhala. Over the next four or five years, international membership of AMOOKOS grew to over 200 individuals. There are now a wide cross-section of individuals working in the Natha tradition across the world, many as lone sadhus and some running small in-groups and clans. There is a thriving natha presence on the internet, and a great deal of tantric material can be found on the World-Wide Web.

The core of the Natha philosophy is enshrined in the term *Svecchacharya*.

Svecchacharya is a Sanskrit term which can be understood as "the path of doing one's will." The author Bernard Walker has commented that it is synonymous with Aleister Crowley's injunction "Do What Thou Wilt." Tantrics believe that it is our conditioning - the delusions and artificial limitations which we place upon ourselves - that

prevent us from realising our hidden, radiant nature. Much of Natha practice then, is aimed at loosening ourselves from the 'Kleshas' (knots) which bind us and prevent us from uniting with the Shiva-Shakti within. A doer of Svecchacharya follows no rules other than to do his or her own will. In the Natha tradition there are no rigorous regulations regarding what one should or should not do. As Dadaji once commented - "A Sannyasin has no rules to follow, just a way of life to live."

Non-sectarianism is also a core element of the Natha tradition. Therefore, for a Nath, all paths are equally valid and deserving of respect, even if they are not what we choose to do ourselves. Much of the sectarianism we see in modern occultism is based on unthinking prejudice or the desire to be "Right" which necessitates seeing others as "Wrong."

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